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World

Monday,
February 28,
2005

U.S. mulls end to work of U.N. WMD inspectors

2005-02-28 / Associated Press /

After blocking discussions for nearly two years, the United States has quietly started low-key talks on ending the work of U.N. inspectors who are charged with dismantling Iraq's chemical, biological and long-range missile programs.

The administration of U.S. President George W. Bush has come under pressure from the Iraqi government, which has been waging a public campaign to stop using Iraqi oil revenue to finance the U.N. Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission and wrap up its operations.

"This is a very important issue and one that we have been discussing for quite some time with the Iraqis and now with key members of the Security Council," Richard

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Grenell, spokesman for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, said Friday. "Those discussions continue."

American officials had said repeatedly that the United States wouldn't formally discuss the future of the commission, known as UNMOVIC, until after the U.S. weapons search in Iraq was complete. In an October 6 report, chief U.S. arms hunter Charles Duelfer discredited Bush's stated rationale for invading Iraq, saying his Iraq Survey Group found no weapons of mass destruction in the country.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov said Thursday that after the Iraq Survey Group's report and the recent Iraqi elections it was time for the Security Council to discuss the future of U.N. inspections.

Fedotov, a member of UNMOVIC's board of commissioners, said that one issue the board discussed at a meeting this week was how these new developments "could have an impact on the process of what we call the final clarification of disarmament in Iraq."

"There is a broad feeling" that the Security Council should discuss these issues and that UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is responsible for dismantling any Iraqi

nuclear programs, "should be involved in this process," he said.

"The mandate to UNMOVIC and IAEA was given by the Security Council, and the Security Council can make another decision, take an action in order to modify or to bring to an end this mandate," Fedotov said.

The council is expected to discuss UNMOVIC's next report in early March.

Chief U.N. weapons inspector Demetrius Perricos, who is UNMOVIC's executive chairman, confirmed that the Americans had "started informal consultations" on the commission's future.

"It's not only the Americans, there are a lot of different delegations that are interested," he said. "It's what was expected. Some day they have to start. But we don't know the contents. It's still kept at a low-key level."

U.N. diplomats said they didn't expect any Security Council action in March or April, but sooner rather than later - possibly in May. The United States wants to get rid of UNMOVIC but France wants to keep a roster of chemical, biological and missile inspectors who could be called on in emergencies, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Members of UNMOVIC, the outgrowth of an inspections process created after the 1991 Gulf War in which invading Iraqi forces were ousted from Kuwait, are considered the only weapons experts specifically trained in biological weapons and missile disarmament. They also investigated Iraq's chemical weapons programs, but international chemical inspections are done by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, based at The Hague, Netherlands.

UNMOVIC and IAEA inspectors left Iraq just before the March 2003 U.S.-led war that toppled Saddam Hussein, and the United States has barred them from returning.

There is a question of whether they should return to Iraq to fulfill their mandate before their missions formally end, diplomats said.

Iraq's U.N. Ambassador Samir Sumaidaie has been arguing that Iraq does not pose a threat and does not possess any weapons of mass destruction, and therefore it is a waste of money to spend more than US\$10 million a year to fund UNMOVIC.


"I think that we should work toward closing these files and unburden Iraq of the legacy

of Saddam's rule," he said earlier this month.

On Friday, the Iraqi ambassador said he was encouraged that the United States had started talks with council members, and that "it's moving forward."

"Whatever process is agreed upon to wind up this operation, we will go along with," he said in an interview. "But the principle should be accepted that from now on Iraq should not bear this burden any longer."

"There are ways of making use of this expertise, maybe for international monitoring, but that should be funded from the United Nations - not from Iraq. We are not against that, and would be subject to the same regime as any other country," Sumaidaie said.

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